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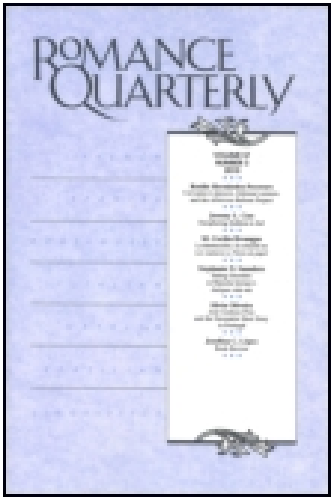

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José as a Male Cinderella

Pierre L. Ullman

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If some scholars of English literature have found good reasons to call Thackeray's Henry Esmond a male Cinderella, we have greater justification for applying this denomination to the hero of Palacio Valdés's *José*.[1] Cinderella motifs can be found throughout the Spanish novel applied to both the protagonist and his fiancée, Elisa. Cinderella has two older stepsisters; José has two older half sisters. Cinderella is ill-treated by her stepmother; José is ill-treated by his mother, who might as well be a stepmother during his childhood years. The unpromising folktale heroes who are analogs of Cinderella are often helped by an old man; this happens to José when Don Fernando de Meira comes to his aid. The folktales usually end in a happy marriage after the hero has performed certain tasks; this is the case in Palacio's novel when we consider José's dangerous work as a fisherman, which he must carry on in order to start his marriage and support a family. Moreover, Elisa's travails are likewise remindful of Cinderella's.

As we shall see, some Cinderella motifs are applied only to the hero, some only to the heroine, and some to both. In addition, we find that some motifs found only in female Cinderella tales are applied here to the male protagonist, the reason being apparently that the society described by Palacio Valdés has the characteristics of a matriarchy. The fisherman's trade in the rough Atlantic is arduous and dangerous; these men are resigned to the fate that the unpredictable sea with its shifting winds has in store for them. After struggling with the forces of nature, they avoid quarreling with their fellow-men. Their women must learn to prepare for widowhood. Just as in Pereda's *Sotileza*, the only street fights in José's Asturian village occur between women.

Now let us examine these characteristics in more detail. José is not only the youngest child, a factor typical of Cinderellas and their analogs; he is illegitimate. His two older half sisters, on the other hand, are legitimate; their widowed mother, Teresa, is made pregnant and abandoned by a transient Basque fisherman. Whereas Cinderella is a female child with a dead mother, José is a male child with a disappeared father. Instead of two stepsisters he has half sisters, but they may as well be stepsisters and, up to a point, the mother may as well be a stepmother, for her resentment toward the man who abandoned her is taken out on his child, and the half sisters follow her example.

Nevertheless, like Perrault's Cinderella, José is dutiful, kind, and forgiving. On the night that her husband dies at sea, José's sister rushes into the tavern with her six children, and tearfully embraces her brother. She then pushes the children towards him, telling them, "con cierta expresión teatral que repugna a los circunstantes, bien enterados de lo mucho que aquél había sufrido por su causa,"[2] to beg their uncle on their knees to be a father to them. Unaware, unlike everyone else, of his sister's hypocrisy, he nobly accepts with kind words the heavy burden, though he is at the nadir of his fortunes. José's behavior towards his sister here is very remindful of the forgiveness that Perrault's Cinderella shows to her stepsisters.

José's utter lack of vindictiveness is an extraordinary virtue in view of the treatment he underwent as a child:

> Teresa no pudo ni quiso criarlo: entrególo a una aldeana que se avino a hacerlo mediante algunos reales, y siguió dedicada a las penosas tareas de su oficio. Cuando al cabo de dos años la nodriza se lo trajo, no supo qué hacer de él; dejólo entregado a sus hermanitas, que a su vez le abandonaban para irse a jugar: el pobre niño lloraba durante horas tendido sobre la tierra apisonada de la bodega, sin recibir el consuelo de una caricia: cuando lo arrastraban consigo a la calle era para sentarlo en ella medio desnudo con riesgo de ser pisado por las bestias o atropellado por un carro. Si alguna vecina lo recogía por caridad, Teresa, al llegar a casa, en vez de agradecérselo, la apostrofaba por "meterse en la vida ajena." (ch. 4, pp. 92-93)[3]

The dirt floor of the house is equivalent to the ashes in which Cinderella is wont to sit, though certainly not with the deeper meaning claimed by Jungian interpretation.[4] Indeed, it should be pointed out that the folktale motifs here are valid only with relation to plot and characterization. Jungian interpretations regarding individuation and contrition, as well as Freudian interpretations regarding Oedipal rivalry of the female child with the mother,[5] cannot possibly apply.

Teresa is described by the author as "desbocada, colérica, una furia" (pp. 92-93 and passim), which aids the reader to assimilate her to a stepmother. Yet there is an important and crucial difference. When her son grows up strong and turns out to be totally loyal, Teresa begins to act in accordance with her real interests. Instinctively realizing the importance of family solidarity, she too shows her loyalty. It becomes evident in her shouting match with Isabel, Elisa's mother (ch. 7), in their hand-to-hand fight (ch. 9), and in Teresa's recognition of her error in her treatment of Elisa (ch. 12).

The trouble with Teresa is that she is "de temperamento impetuoso y ardiente, apasionada en sus amores como en sus odios, pronta a enojarse por livianos motivos" (p. 92). For Palacio Valdés this is not the worst possible character. A calculating one is much worse. This type is fully mani-

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fested in Isabel, who is described as "astuta" (p. 94), "vieja, de rostro enjuto, nariz afilada y de ojos negros y hundidos" (p. 71). Her avarice and selfishness become evident in the scene following this description (ch. 2). The author's metaphors in other passages reinforce this impression, though we must remember that it is not the narrator but Teresa who calls Isabel a witch. Still, Isabel is definitely the villain in this novel, just as the stepmother is the villain in Cinderella tales.

Now there is a person in town who does have a reputation for witchcraft. It is the sacristan's wife, whose role in the novel is not unlike that of the Baba Yaga in the Russian type of Cinderella tale. This is another fairy-tale motif which adds much to the local color in the novel and perhaps a little to the metaphorical ambiance. Moreover, the existence of a character who truly enjoys the reputation of being a witch helps to remind the reader that the metaphorical value of the witchlike characterization of Isabel is only partial and superficial. Hence the reader will not view Isabel as such in a serious way, and the precepts of realism are not transgressed. Palacio Valdés seems to be averse to obfuscating Isabel's characterization by adding to it the theme of witchcraft.[6] Yet the superficial comparison of Isabel to a witch may have the purpose of helping us in this instance to discard from our minds any images of selflessness we might expect from the relationship that traditionally exists between a mother and a daughter, for Isabel behaves like a stepmother even though she is Elisa's mother. Still, once the stepmother motif is accepted, we must in turn discard the witch simile at that level of interpretation if we are to understand the basic fairy-tale elements in the plot. Now, if we recognize the stepmother motif in the characterization of Isabel, it follows that her daughter Elisa is a Cinderella, at least in part. In the best-known Cinderella variants the heroine falls from favor after her mother's death, and the motif of hidden heritage or unrecognized nobility is attached to her. This heritage or nobility is then revealed by the famous slipper test. In our novel, inheritance is the prime factor of the plot, for it motivates Isabel to prevent her daughter from marrying José. Moreover, according to some psychological interpretations of the Cinderella tale, the stepmother figure symbolizes, in the psyche of the listener, a mother's resistance to her daughter's leaving home.[7] That is, the mother figure for the child listener is split into the helpful fairy godmother and the hindering stepmother. But Palacio Valdés has used the theme for plot rather than characterization. The key to understanding the significance of the theme for the novel is found at the end of Chapter 2, in the description of the relation between Elisa, her mother, and her stepfather. Elisa was her father's rightful heir, and Isabel could administer her daughter's inheritance until she reached maturity, at which time Isabel had to relinquish it. She and her second husband, however, were counting on Elisa's docility, which Isabel had inculcated into her from the age of twelve, when the father died.

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The recognition of Elisa's rightful inheritance is finally brought about through the help of Don Fernando. Indeed, the scene in which the judge, Don Cipriano, the secretary, Don Telesforo, and José and his benefactor, Don Fernando de Meira, enter the shop of Elisa's family with a writ in order to obtain a judicial declaration from her and remove her from the tutelage of her parents bears a strong resemblance, plotwise at least, to the scene of the folktale in which the prince's emissaries go to Cinderella's house to try on the glass slipper and take her to the palace. There likewise occurs a villain nemesis, so common in the Cinderella folktales, when Isabel is humiliated.

Now Elisa had realized for a long time that the family fortune was really hers, but it was not only her docility and fear of her mother that prevented her from doing something about it. Elisa, like José, possessed the basic goodness of Cinderella: "Elisa se representaba bien claramente que la causa de aquella ruda oposición no era otra que la avaricia, el disgusto de entregar los bienes que pertenecían a su difunto padre; pero no sólo no lo confesaba a nadie, sino que hacía esfuerzos por no creerlo y alejar de sí tal pensamiento, y aun se prometía muchas veces despojarse de su hacienda cuando llegase el caso, para no causar pesadumbre alguna a su madre" (ch. 13, p. 175). Yet Elisa, like Perrault's Cinderella, is not totally accepting of her situation. Cinderella kept secrets from her stepmother, such as the conversations with her fairy godmother, her presence at the ball, and her meeting and dancing with the prince. Elisa likewise engages in secret behavior, such as meeting José in the garden and striking up a friendship with his mother. It is even probable that Palacio intentionally gives his readers hints about Elisa's being a Cinderella figure. One is in Chapter 10 in a surreptitious conversation with José:

> —¿Y por qué crees que tu madre presume algo?—dijo José en voz baja.
>
> —No sé decirte; pero de algunos días a esta parte me mira mucho y no me deja un instante sola. El otro día, mientras estaba barriendo la casa, me puse a cantar. Al instante subió ella y me dijo: "¡Parece que estás contenta, Elisa! Hacía mucho tiempo que no te salía la voz del cuerpo." Me lo dijo de un modo y con una sonrisa tan falsa, que me puse colorada y me callé. (p. 151)

The heroine is shown at a menial task, she unintentionally reveals by her behavior that she has some hope, and the dominating figure exhibits suspicion, motifs found in most versions of the Cinderella tale. Another possible hint is Elisa's dream about shoes, thus relating Elisa's story to Cinderella's glass slipper.

It is to Palacio's credit as a writer that this dream is Elisa's rather than José's. There is of course no such thing as a slipper test for the male cin-

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derellas of folklore, so that any metaphor for it with respect to José would have been an unnecessary exaggeration. There are, however, tests of valor in the folktales. Indeed, the trials José must endure as a sailor are comparable to those of the unpromising heroes of folklore. First he enlists as a seaman on a merchant vessel, bringing to mind the themes of expatriation and quest often found in male cinderella stories. Afterwards he is able to buy two boats. The first is destroyed when Isabel insinuates fiendish thoughts into the mind of the village idiot, who, believing himself José's rival for Elisa's love, cuts the moorings. The second is sold to pay Teresa's debts. The third, which he acquires by means of Don Fernando's charity, is saved, along with the lives of its crew, from the ravages of a storm by José's skill, decisiveness, and authority as its captain. We should note the threefold appearance of the boat motif; triadic occurrences are typical of folktales, Cinderella being no exception. It is also important that the loss of the first two boats was not José's fault, and that the preservation of the third was due to his conquest of the elements through qualities that he had not fully exhibited previously. He had always been timid, especially with women, and was terribly afraid of Isabel, even to the end when he accompanied the judge to her house. Still, his authority and decisiveness had to be manifested with men rather than women, as in the case of any hero.

In many folktales, including several versions of Cinderella, there are helpful animals. In *José* this animal is the fish, though only for its material worth as food. Palacio, to be sure, had to do obéisance to realism. Nevertheless, he finds a way to include the folklore motif of the animal who is the bearer of good tidings. He does it by means of a simile, when he writes that "cada bonito que prendía en los anzuelos de José y entraba saltando en su lancha, parecía un heraldo que le anunciaba su boda" (ch. 5, p. 103).

Emblematic fish notwithstanding, in *José* the hero's helper is a human being, as is the case in several Cinderella variants. Yet, owing to his appearance, this gentleman reminds the reader of supernatural beings found in folktales. The author leads us to think of Don Fernando de Meira, the ruined nobleman, as looking like a troll, when, at the very place in the story where Don Fernando's plans will be put into action, his physique is described as a "cuerpecillo contrahecho" (ch. 12, p. 169).[8] We also read that "lo mismo Teresa que Elisa no dejaban de advertir que la sombra dol noble vástago las protegía" (ch. 13, p. 176). Such protection, then, must have seemed almost magical to these naïve folk. Moreover, folktale intercessors usually exercise their charity on heroes and heroines after the latter have exhibited their charity towards them. In Chapter 10 Don Fernando is at the point of starvation and José succors him repeatedly even though José and his family are themselves in very dire straits. In return, Don Fernando sells his ancestral mansion, giving most of the proceeds to José to buy a new boat. Nonetheless, he retains enough to keep himself alive while carrying

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out his plan to bring on the judicial proceedings that will result in the liberation of Elisa from her mother and lead to her marriage to José. Don Fernando then disappears.

The novel also contains three motifs not necessarily associated with any Cinderella variants but which nonetheless contribute to its metaphoricity, for their use here is remindful of their treatment in fairy tales. The first is that of blood, which appears almost emblematic at the point where the women gut the fish in the harbor. So does the simile of silver ingots for the catch of sardines reflecting the sun's rays on José's boat, as it seems to ennoble the humble fisherman for a symbolic role as a fairy-tale prince. The third is water symbolism, in the scene where the Meira family's coat of arms is dropped into the sea, which is at the time as calm as a lake, while Don Fernando and José weep. It is probably inspired by the folktale association of lake water with tears and pity.

This paper has attempted to show that both protagonists in Palacio Valdés's novel share some of the characteristics of Cinderella, although the hero's status as a male Cinderella is more obvious than the heroine's as a female one. These characteristics, derived from traditional folktale motifs, are pertinent to the plot and to its metaphorical interpretation, but they cannot be related to Freudian or Jungian concepts.

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1. The denomination "male cinderella" has been used by folklorists for decades. Marian Roalfe Cox, *Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap O'Rushes* (London: The Folk-Lore Society, [1892]; rpt. Nendeln: Kraus, 1967), pp. 437-46, includes 23 "hero tales." Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1957), V, 8, i.e., the Aarne-Thompson motif index, lists number L101 as: "*Unpromising hero* (male Cinderella). Usually, but not always, the unpromising hero is the youngest son." We should note that José is the youngest child. Another important study is Emmanuel Cosquin, "Le Cendrillon masculin," *Revue des Traditions Populaires* 33 (1918), 193-202. It should be pointed out that of the female Cinderella variants listed by Cox, three are Spanish and five Portuguese.

2. Armando Palacio Valdés, *José*, ed. by Jorge Campos (Madrid: Catedra, 1975), ch. 8, p. 139. All further references in the body of this paper will be to this edition.

3. On hearing this account, we should not forget that the sisters had also experienced their mother's ire.

4. See Marie-Louise von Franz, "The Beautiful Wassilissa," in *Problems of the Feminine in Fairytales* (New York: Spring Publications, 1972), 143-57; rpt. in Alan Dundes, ed., *Cinderella: a Casebook* (New York: Wildman, 1983), pp. 200-18.

5. See Ben Rubenstein, "The Meaning of the Cinderella Tale in the Development of a Little Girl," *American Imago* 12 (1955): 195-205; rpt. in Dundes, pp. 219-28.

6. Campos, pp. 43-44, says that "la maldad que suele oponerse a la bondad y la inocencia en el dualismo propio de las novelas populares aparece en *José* personificada en una figura, la de la madre de Elisa. . . . Isabel, es decir, la maldad, es

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vencida por la sabia utilización de la ley y el altruismo representado por el hidalgo de Meira, como la bruja de los cuentos infantiles." This indicates that a character who can be considered a witch at one level of interpretation should not be so considered at another level. As critics like Northrop Frye have demonstrated, there are several hierarchies of metaphorical organization.

7. See von Franz, pp. 212-13: "The mother having to pull away from the daughter is always a problem in the second half of life," after which the symbolism of the stepmother is explained.

8. Campos, p. 43, calls him "verdadera hada benéfica."

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